

Town of Amherst Human Rights Commission
Thursday, June 17, 2010

Present: Chairman Reynolds Winslow, Human Rights Director Eunice Torres, Commissioner Frank Gatti, Commissioner Josiah Litant, Commissioner Lois Raj, Commissioner Stefan Cejic, Commissioner Kathleen Anderson

Excused: Vice Chairperson Victoria Oliva, Commissioner Mohamed Elgadi

Guests: Former HRC member Joseph Wronka, Town Manager Larry Shaffer

Meeting commenced at 7:09pm

I. HRC Director's Position Concerns (moved up in agenda at the request of the Town Manager and approved by the Commission)

Chairman Winslow explains to the Town Manager the Commission's concerns about the reduced number of hours that our Human Rights Director has to give to Human Rights issues since her job was combined with that of Human Resources Director a while back. In addition, the number of people of filing human rights complaints appears to have dwindled significantly since the Human Rights Director was moved out of the Bangs Center to Town Hall, and the Commission is concerned that this is due to the new location of the Director's office.

Joseph Wronka is a former HRC member and a permanent member to the Human Rights group in Geneva, as well as a town citizen. Mr. Wronka commends Mr. Shaffer on his commitment to Human Rights and his support of the work of this Commission. Mr. Wronka asks if there is anything that we can do to help address issues of access to Director Torres' office, as this will be in the best interest of the community.

Commissioner Gatti expresses concern that the HRC will become increasingly ceremonial and not serve its other functions. He discusses the inherent contradiction between the Human Resources Director being part of town government and the need for the Human Rights Director to be a somewhat separate entity so that individuals feel comfortable bringing complaints to her office. How can we make the Human Rights Director more independent and to be seen as such by the community?

Chairman Winslow states that in our annual report we see that our complaint numbers are dwindling—this could be read by some as the HRC no longer being needed. This would be the worst thing that could happen.

Commissioner Gatti discusses the positive job that Director Torres has done in her role, creating a unique style that has helped us to resolve Human Rights issues, often through mediation rather than through an antagonistic approach.

Commissioner Litant says that our basic concern is to maintain access to services, which includes both administrative support for the HRC as well as access to Human Rights services for the townspeople.

Mr. Shaffer says that this year, on July 1, it will be four years since he arrived in Amherst. When he first came there was an opportunity for him to discuss concerns about human rights issues with the HRC, including issues of town employees and where the town was at in terms of hiring people of color. It was decided, at that time, that the town would address issues in “our house first” and then seeing how we could bring services better to the public. Mr. Shaffer reports that he feels like we have done a strong job of improving the diversity profile of the town organization. The town manager cites examples of the many additions of people of color and other minorities to the town staff. One of the most important signals that we can give to our community is that we not only talk the talk, but we walk the walk—our values should be expressed in our hiring decisions. Mr. Shaffer gives the example of the recent hire of a person of color as our new fire chief, someone whom we recruited a year and a half ago. Over the last few years we have made some very significant inroads in terms of changing the complexion of our organization. The values that we say we live by can now be demonstrated in our hiring practices.

Mr. Shaffer states that we have had some very significant budget issues in these last four years as well. The resources that have been provided to the town have shrunk, and thus the Human Rights and Human Resources Director positions were combined. Mr. Shaffer would estimate that the job of Human Resources Director takes up 90% of Director Torres’ time now. He would like to propose a sit-down with Director Torres and Chairman Winslow in the next month to begin discussing what additional resources could potentially be put in place to better support the Commission and the townspeople.

Mr. Shaffer says that Mrs. Leslie Salisbury, who is currently in a grant funded position that ends in December, has recently been in conversation about possibilities for her to continue her work in human rights with the town, and this could be an area to explore further.

There has been a new initiative, Mr. Shaffer states, that Mrs. Salisbury has been working on, to bring town services to parts of town that have not historically had access to them. Many different town departments will be involved in this; taking services that are currently more insular and trying to turn them out to make connections with communities that we have not previously made suitable contact with. Perhaps the HRC could participate in this.

Mr. Shaffer reiterates his commitment to meeting with the Chairman and Director to discuss this further. He states that we should all be proud of the work we have done together in the last few years, and that we have been making progress.

Chairman Winslow thanks Mr. Shaffer for hearing our concerns.

Mr. Wronka discusses the many different recognized days (e.g. Human Rights Day, Women's Day, Children's Rights Day, etc.) that could be potential areas for collaboration with other organizations. He thanks Mr. Shaffer for taking the time to come and to address the HRC's concerns quickly.

Mr. Shaffer says that he and Director Torres have discussed on multiple occasions the fact that they will not be in this organization forever, and it's critical that they leave an organization that reflects our values at every level, and that is a reflection of our community-at-large.

Commissioner Gatti encourages Director Torres to share the good work she has done, to step in and help townspeople with human rights issues, with the town manager if she has not already been doing so. She has made significant contributions to help and intervene in some very difficult situations. Mr. Shaffer says that his office is right next to the Human Rights/Resources Director's office, so he has the opportunity to see this good work on a daily basis. Though this was identified as a potential drawback to people going to the Director's office to file complaints, there are some benefits as well and this is one.

Chairman Winslow thanks Mr. Shaffer again. Mr. Shaffer states that a conversation will happen soon between himself, the Director, and the Chairman, and he'd be happy to come back to the HRC meeting next month to report on this.

II. Agenda

Any additions? Yes, the open meeting law should be added to new business.

III. Minutes Review

The minutes were read aloud by Chairman Winslow. Approval of the last meeting's minutes with one spelling change was passed by consensus.

IV. Old Business

CMASS Letter: Chairman Winslow has written to Rep. Ellen Story regarding the dismantling of Cultural Centers of the UMass campus. He also wrote to the Chancellor, but had no response. Vice Chancellor's Kim's office called Director Torres' office, and Chairman Winslow has set up a meeting with the Vice Chancellor, Byron Bullock (the architect of the CMASS plan), and a delegation from the HRC, on Thursday, July 22, from 2-3pm at the Associate Vice Chancellor's Office most likely. More information on that will follow. The Chairman will send out the final time/place/date when it's solidified. As many HRC members as can attend should attend.

Annual festival: The Chairman commends Director Torres on her hard work to help make our annual festival a success. The Director received many emails from parents thanking the HRC for this important event. It is suggested that photos from the event can be put on our website. Director Torres says she got an email from a senior student who could not make the event, but who would love to be a part of the planning of next year's event. Commissioner Gatti reports that there were at least 50 people in attendance at this event.

He also reports on the Lifetime Achievement Awards that were presented at this event as well. Commissioner Gatti also says that the awards were filmed by ACTV and should be on television this week.

The Director says she would like us to begin thinking about this event for next year now. Discussion about things to consider for next year including advertising, soliciting nominations, etc. It would be advisable to have a subcommittee work on this during the year, which Director Torres would be willing to sit on. Commissioner Gatti suggests that it would be beneficial to attend teachers meetings at the local schools in the fall and then again in January to tell them about the nominations process and then to hand them a copy of the nomination form. He also suggests that church groups could be a good place to look for nominations as well. Chairperson Winslow says it would be helpful to have a template to outline exactly what needs to be done for this event, month by month, task by task.

Newspaper article draft: the Chairman says he thinks that it may be time to defer this project permanently. Commissioner Anderson apologizes for not being able to take the time to work on this. Commissioner Litant suggests that it may be best for us to focus on advertising our events in local papers, and having our events covered by the local papers/television, instead of trying to write articles. Chairman Winslow suggests that if a Commissioner decides to write an editorial and it gets published, that would be great, but we won't focus on it.

December 10/12 event update: Commissioner Gatti discusses some connections he's made about possibilities for entertainment/speakers at this event. Director Torres says that she has a friend who is on the faculty at MHC who is willing to be a part of the event. Commissioner Litant says that there has been some real interest from a few students at the Five Colleges in collaborating with us on this event, and we will reach out to them in the fall. Commissioner Gatti provides the Commission with the contact information for Noah Hoffenberg, who is the editor of the Daily Gazette who we should be in contact with for this and other events. Contact: noah@gazettenet.com

Jason Vassell case: The Chairman says that if you search the web, you can see a video of what happened in the lobby at the dormitory the night of the Vassell incident. Mr. Vassell received a two and a half year probation, which means that the criminal charges will be removed at the end of the probation. Commissioner Anderson says it is terrible that the other two people essentially got off. Commissioner Gatti says it is, however, reaffirming that a community outcry was able to help make an impact in this case.

V. New Business

Heroes Group Award: We discussed planning for next year already along with old business.

New initiatives: Commissioner Litant hands out a draft document titled "Communications Strategy Proposal." He asks all Commissioners to review this document for discussion at our next meeting in order to figure out how best to move

forward with our communications plan. Commissioner Litant reports that he may be moving out of town (to be determined shortly), and if that is to happen, he would no longer be able to serve as a Commissioner. Therefore, this proposal should be read in terms of deciding how we might proceed in Commissioner Litant's absence (as the Communications Officer). The Commissioner will notify the HRC members and the town immediately if/when he should find that he is moving.

Commissioner Anderson discusses the latest work in C3 (Cross-Cultural Communications) at the local schools, and the indication of need for more conversations about race, class, etc with students and others. There is a lot of interest in this. Commissioner Litant seconds this, and hands out a copy of an editorial from today's Daily Hampshire Gazette by Amherst High School senior Darius Peyton in response to (and support of) former Superintendent Rodriguez's letter to the community of several weeks ago. The Commission agrees that it is important for this letter to appear in the Bulletin as well. An email should be sent to the editor of the Bulletin (will the chair do this?).

Director Torres discusses the open meeting law. Effective July 1, any communications between committees outside of meetings must stop—this will be enforced. Agendas will also have to be posted online 7 days in advance of any commission meeting, along with approved minutes of the previous meeting at the same time. The Director indicates that there is a penalty if anyone is caught violating this law. Director Torres says that this a state-wide initiative. Commissioner Gatti asks about subcommittees. Director Torres says that a subcommittee that does not meet quorum can meet without following these policies, because they are not empowered to make decisions. Any meetings with quorum must follow these meeting laws. The Director clarifies that you can send out via email logistical information between Commissioners (e.g., the time of the next meeting), but you cannot engage in any deliberations or decision-making outside of meetings.

VI. Director's Report

The Director reports that the new budget starts on July 1.

VII. Announcements

Commissioner Anderson reports that Family Fun Day is happening Saturday at Groff Park, 10am-6pm. Director Torres states that there are several town departments involved in this event as well.

VIII. Adjournment

Commissioner Raj motions to adjourn. Commissioner Gatti seconds.

Meeting adjourned at 8:35pm.

Respectfully submitted this seventeenth of June, 2010.

Josiah S. Litant
Communications Officer